

# The Practical Application of Sustainable Tourism Development Principles

*A Case Study of Creating Innovative Place-making Tourism Strategies.*



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## Findings

The Blackstone Valley is working to create a sustainable visitor destination using whole place-making techniques. The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council applies leadership and commitment to innovative sustainable tourism principles.

The Tourism Council fulfills the vision of sustainable tourism through its Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory. The Laboratory's purpose is to share the Tourism Council's experience in developing planned sustainable tourism with tourism leaders and community stakeholders seeking to develop viable destinations.





## Conclusions

The Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory presents a learning initiative that prepares decision makers and shapers to thoughtfully develop and regenerate their communities using sustainable tourism principles. In the formation of the Laboratory mission, certain sustainable tourism development issues stood out as significant and needing prompt attention by practitioners. In response the Laboratory has developed and continues to develop a series of robust symposiums, conferences, and programs to link the Laboratory's work to the thirst for tourism development knowledge.



## Introduction

The Blackstone River Valley, located in New England is the first industrialized valley in North America. This is where the American Industrial Revolution was launched to transform the United States into an industrial world power. After 150 years of economic growth the Blackstone Valley lost its economic base, which began a downturn in all facets of the community.

After years of significant economic, environmental, socio-cultural and historical degradation, thoughtful tourism development and a new approach to community regeneration, emerged to transform the Blackstone Valley into an interesting place to live, work, and visit. Today the Blackstone Valley is a viable destination and a role model in sustainable tourism management (Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, 2006; Billington & Manheim, 2002; Billington, 1999).

The Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory (STPDL) is an emerging project of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Inc of Rhode Island, USA. The Laboratory focuses on place-based tourism through an educational platform concerned with supporting whole communities through creative and innovative sustainable tourism development practices, sharing the knowledge it has gained over the past twenty-two years. Although the primary study area of STPDL is the Blackstone Valley, it is also home to a global network of members seeking to understand and apply new approaches to sustainable tourism.

There is a growing need in communities to create well-developed and thoughtful tourism planning and development strategies. Tourism can impact a community negatively and yet many people see only positive results from bringing visitors to their existing and potential



destination. The goal of the Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory is to prepare current and future leaders with knowledge necessary to build and shape a successful, sustainable visitor destination.

The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Inc created the STPDL after twenty-two years of experience in tourism planning and development projects and programs. This Laboratory is where the principles of sustainable community development through tourism is explored, practiced, and applied to another community. Though the STPDL is based in the Blackstone Valley, it is already working to assist communities with their on-site planning and destination management on a national level. The STPDL has a team that can travel to destinations and communities around the world.

The Tourism Council has worked on four continents, exchanging ideas and forming relationships that have nourished economic development and considers international leadership vital for the Laboratory's success. Internationally the Tourism Council gained an additional understanding of sustainability issues while working with the Amber Valley Borough Council of Derbyshire in England. In 1994 the Amber Valley Blackstone Valley Compact was signed, it formed a bond between the two areas to work on shared goals. These goals were based on those developed by Sister Cities International (Sister Cities International, 2007). The two areas are similar industrial river valleys whose industries and population share a like history and fate. The two Valleys have worked mainly on an exchange of ideas, creative solutions, and share an interest in sustainable development issues. This relationship has provided the Council with fifteen years of international experience.



## **Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory 2006**

In 2006 the Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory began implementing tourism-learning programs for individuals, organizations and governments. These programs brought together international specialists, practitioners, and educators in sustainable tourism principles and practices to discuss, explore and develop implementation plans. All these presentations are public and are available on the Sustainable Tourism Laboratory website for no fee. Below are some examples of programs delivered and accomplishments achieved within the past year.

### **A. Blackstone Alert**

In March of 2006 the Sustainable Tourism Laboratory developed a disaster mitigation symposium. Blackstone Alert, created to bring together local, state and federal officials to consider a multi-state, multi-community strategy to analyze flood conditions along the Blackstone River in Massachusetts and Rhode Island with the aim of mitigating damages to public, private, and government infrastructure. Over \$300 million in private development is taking place along the banks of the Blackstone River (Billington, R. D, 2004) yet a flood mitigation strategy was not in place.

Emerging from that convening is a multi-state strategy and action team to bring the Blackstone Valley communities in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island into harmony so that they can determine sustainable development and disaster mitigation policies in the Blackstone River Watershed. An immediate outcome was a website <http://www.blackstonealert.com> hosted by the Tourism Council with seventeen resource links and a list of related articles.



## **B. The UNWTO Ulysses Prize**

In June 2006, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council was presented the prestigious Ulysses Prize from the United Nations World Tourism Organization in Madrid, Spain. The Ulysses Prize is considered the “Nobel Prize of Tourism” according to Eduardo Fayos Sola, Director of the UNWTO’s Knowledge Management Division. (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2007)

The Tourism Council was recognized for its innovation in Tourism destination Management through its contribution for facilitating positive change with regard to community values in Rhode Island over the past 21 years. The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council is said to be “a world pioneer” in developing tourism as an instrument to regenerate the first river to die in the North America due to industrial pollution, by creating a sense-of-place within its nine communities.

The Ulysses Award scheme was created by the United Nations World Tourism Organization to recognize and highlight the professional achievements of outstanding individuals, institutions and destination management organizations in contributing to innovation and knowledge creation in tourism. The Ulysses prize recognizes outstanding achievement but also highlights best practices, making those working in tourism throughout the world aware of the ongoing innovative developments taking place in destinations, businesses and institutions in all regions of the world as well as encouraging greater innovation, knowledge development and the dissemination of this knowledge. (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2007)

Recipients of the WTO Ulysses Awards or Prizes must have made major contributions to building knowledge in tourism and enhancing its image as an essential factor in the economic, political, social and cultural advancement of societies. (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2007)





### **C. VolunTourism Conference**

June 2006 the Sustainable Tourism Laboratory presented the first United States conference on VolunTourism in cooperation with VolunTourism International. The Conference was presented in collaboration with Rhode Island Foundation, Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, Johnson & Wales University, the University of Rhode Island, The George Washington University, and VolunTourism International. The objective of the conference was to develop a North American VolunTourism.

VolunTourism is an experience that combines both travel and service. This is also referred to as participatory travel. This experience provides significant economic, social, and environmental benefits to tourism destinations (Hawkins D., Lamoureux K., & Clemmons D. 2005). In addition to visiting a destination, VolunTourism allows the traveler to follow their passion and interest as well as lending their talents to this experience. It also gives the traveler an opportunity to interact with the community, leaving something of themselves through a labor of gratitude that is offered as part of their overall vacation (VolunTourism, 2007).

The goal of the conference was to create awareness among the stakeholders in Rhode Island. Further it was an opportunity to learn about this new and emerging sector of Tourism and how this concept can be incorporated in our already existing product. During the conference the participants learned innovative ways to:

Enhance the visitor's experience with VolunTourism

- 1 Add value to their already existing products by using VolunTourism as a tool
- 2 Identify new markets through VolunTourism
- 3 Discover the benefits of VolunTourism and apply them to their organization.





The conference met its goals by preparing the first domestic VolunTourism itinerary for the United States. Further it created new and innovative ways to look at old things. In short, VolunTourism presented creative ways to package and brand our destination for a unique and growing market. The participants also walked away from the conference with new ways of generating income for their businesses and they were enlightened on how to enhance their labor force through the VolunTourism experience.

#### **D. United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) .Sbest Certification**

The United Nations World Tourism Organization created the WTO .Sbest initiative to contribute to the achievement of excellence in tourism Destination Management. The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council was certified early in Benefits of the UNWTO Certification to the Council and STPDL are:

- 4 Enhanced Tourism policies and destination management procedures
- 5 International recognition through the UNWTO
- 6 Tools to make the destination more competitive
- 7 Ability to share best practices with other destinations
- 8 Time to collaborate with UNWTO in the design and implementation of specific actions and programs for the achievement of excellence at tourism destinations.
- 9 Tools to monitor and improve visitor satisfaction level
- 10 Protocols to become immersed in a process of continual improvement

#### **E. Fieldwork in South East Ohio by STPD Laboratory**

Staff from the STPDL was sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to travel to South East Ohio to work with community development specialists on the creation of a tourism plan. Rural Action spearheads the project. Subsequently, a team of five community members from Ohio traveled to the Blackstone Valley to learn first-hand what the Laboratory has to offer. The community has adopted some of the tourism development principles learned in the Blackstone Valley and has applied for a grant to bring members of the community to the Laboratory in 2007.



## **G. Sustainable Tourism Summit**

In November 2006 the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council hosted a Sustainable Tourism Summit through its STPDL. The Laboratory brought to the table leading policy thinkers and shapers on Tourism development who spent time brainstorming ways to find long-term success in improving the regional economy while preserving the area's natural and historic attractions. Sustainable Tourism is based upon the principles of place-making instead of place-taking. Place-making is about maintaining and sustaining resources of a destination for future generations. Our vision for change through the Sustainable Tourism Laboratory is that it lays the foundation for effective sustainable tourism development policy and planning by providing institutional framework to build livable communities.

The Sustainable Tourism Laboratory program is an experiential, community -based learning opportunity that offers tailor-made solutions to communities seeking to create a tourism program using sustainable tourism strategies. The mission at the Laboratory is to ensure that tourism follows a sustainable path and this requires clear leadership from local authorities and an efficient mechanism that involves all the stakeholders. The responsibility of tourism development lies more and more with local authorities since they represent the interests of their community.

In light of the above, the Sustainable Tourism Laboratory collaborated with the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations, New Commons of Providence RI, The George Washington University, Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, and the United Nation's World Tourism Organization presenting a "think-link and do" workshop in sustainable Tourism practices.



*The Goals of the Sustainable Tourism Summit were to:*

- 1 Define the discussion of 21<sup>st</sup> Century tourism development
- 2 Create a sustainable approach to tourism
- 3 Prepare for the future dynamics challenges that the tourism markets will present
- 4 Ensure actions that regenerate and restore the community of place.
- 5 Enhance the livability and attractiveness of Rhode Island for its residents, businesses and visitors.
- 6 Discuss the importance of place-making rather than place-taking through tourism
- 7 Deliver the ultimate visitor experience.
- 8 Develop an understanding of what Geotourism can mean to a community

Participants at the Summit discussed and concluded in a café-style format the following about sustainability, that is:

- Builds on geographical character to create a type of tourism that emphasizes the distinctiveness of its locale, and that benefits visitor and resident alike.
- Creates a tourist experience that is richer than the sum of its parts, appealing to visitors with diverse interests.
- Works with local businesses and civic groups to promote and provide a distinctive, authentic visitor experience.
- Informs visitors and hosts. As local people develop pride and skill in showing off their locale, tourists get more out of their visit.
- Uses the local workforce, services, and products and supplies.
- Seeks out businesses that emphasize the character of the locale. Tourism revenues in-turn raise local perceived value of those assets.
- *Brings new knowledge home, telling stories that send friends and relatives off to experience the same thing.*



## Results of Conference

The author of the Geotourism principles', Jonathan Tourtellot, was a keynote speaker at the Sustainable Summit, as result of his presentation and the discussion afterward, the state of Rhode Island will be signing and adopting the Geotourism charter in May 2007. Geotourism, as defined by the National Geographic Society, is tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well being of its residents. (National Geographic Society, Sustainable Destinations, 2007)

Participants at the Tourism Summit learned that Geotourism incorporates the concept of sustainable tourism—that destinations should remain unspoiled for future generations—while allowing for enhancement that protects the character of the locale. Geotourism also adopts a principle from its cousin, ecotourism—that tourism revenue can promote conservation—and extends that principle beyond nature travel to encompass culture and history as well; all distinctive assets of a place.

*The concepts of Sustainable Tourism as presented at the Laboratory:*

- **Means “First, do no harm.” It is basic to good destination stewardship.**
- **Does not abuse its product - the destination. It seeks to avoid the “loved to death” syndrome.**
- **Anticipates development pressures and applies limits and management techniques that sustain natural habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal, and local culture.**
- **Conserves resources. Environmentally aware travelers favor businesses that minimize pollution, waste, energy consumption, water usage, landscaping chemicals, and excessive nighttime lighting.**
- **Respects local culture and tradition. Foreign visitors learn about and observe local etiquette, including using at least a few courtesy words in the local language. Residents learn how to deal with foreign expectations that may differ from their own.**
- **Aims for quality, not quantity. Communities measure tourism success not by sheer numbers of visitors, but by length of stay, distribution of money spent, and quality of experience.**



## H. The Green Tourism Symposium

In April 2007, the Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory is hosting The Green Tourism Symposium. It will be the first of its kind in the state of Rhode Island. The symposium will invite tourism practitioners, community decision makers, elected officials and others interested in sustainable tourism.

The agenda will be interactive presentations, workshops, dialogs, and development of useable concepts. The Sustainable Tourism Laboratory will collaborate with the National Recycling Coalition, The George Washington University, the Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, The National Geographic Society Center for Sustainable Destination, the Rhode Island Foundation, the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, and New Commons of Providence RI to present the Symposium.

Green Tourism principles are vital to the long-term success of a destination; the environment and tourism are inextricably linked. The aim of the symposium is to develop an understanding of how residents, businesses, and governments perceive a destination's protection, not just the promotion of its resources. Sustainable Green Tourism practices can bring long-term business and environmental benefits to a community through encouraging sustainable use of our natural and cultural heritages.

In short, the symposium is promoting the concept of responsible tourism where people are reminded to leave a smaller footprint in the destinations they visit. Global warming and Carbon footprint are a major international concerns, therefore, it is critical to integrate protection of the environment into tourism management practices to improve visitor satisfaction, enhance marketing, and satisfy emerging consumer demands. If we are to experience a livable, higher quality-of-life for future generations, we must sustain our social, economic, cultural, and environmental resources.





*The Sustainable Tourism Laboratory plans to achieve the following goals in the Symposium:*

- 1 Focus on the emerging needs and critical environmental aspects of tourism development.
- 2 Establish a common language and understanding among the stakeholders
- 3 Identify issues impacting destinations
- 4 Access information and practices
- 5 Discover market trends for Green Tourism

The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and the STPD Laboratory are implementing the National Recycling Coalition Green Meeting Policy for all meetings. At the Symposium the Laboratory will present New England's first Green Guide. This 50 page booklet contains proven ways to help save the environment in the Blackstone Valley, how to enjoy a "green" holiday, and ways to offset a carbon footprint of a Visitor to the Blackstone Valley of Rhode Island.

Community Projects of Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory

In addition to the conferences and symposium, the STPDL is involved and involving communities in sustainable discussion, solutions, and network. The Laboratory is working in Blackstone Valley cities and towns to create sustainable communities. These are some of the ongoing projects of the Laboratory:

### **I. Riverfront Development:**

The Lab is working on a Central Falls Riverfront development plan, river access in five Blackstone River Valley communities. The Tourism Council has operated five passenger vessels along the Blackstone River, which has little public access. While the Blackstone River can now be viewed by riverboat, it is difficult to provide public tours with limited public access. The STPDL is working with communities and private landowners to open up the river to recreation and commerce. This 15-year effort of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has raised over \$1,000,000 to established safe, accessible river landings in 5 river communities.





### **J. Heritage and Cultural Preservation:**

Work is underway with the restoration of the St Anne's Arts and Cultural Center in Woonsocket. Staff members from the Laboratory are working with the community to determine operational uses for the Center and how to fund them. In May, 100 people are invited to consider ways to restore and operate the Arts and Cultural Center. The STPDL considers this effort essential in the protection and promotion of cultural resources.

### **K. The Blackstone Valley Partnership:**

The Laboratory is working with New Commons and twenty Blackstone Valley organizations to develop a new network of thinking and linking. The STPD Laboratory is doing this on behalf of the twenty-four Blackstone Valley communities that seek to define problems and explore solutions to community sustainability.

### **H. Connected Communities:**

The STPD Laboratory sponsored the Connected Communities Jam in April 2007, bringing together 50 unrelated organizations from four communities, to gather knowledge for an upcoming community development plan. The meeting allowed participants to discuss obstacles that are blocking the progress of getting several communities working together. A formal report will be issued and future meetings will be help to discuss the benefits of community engagement for obtaining sustainable development.



## Conclusion

This paper examines Innovation in Sustainable Tourism Practices by the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council's Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory. The STPD Laboratory is the product of twenty-two years of tourism development experience applied to the Blackstone Valley landscape. During the course of its work the Council has been recognized for its innovative approach to community development for tourism. In respect to tourism planning, Patrick Kennedy, US Congressman, stated, "the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has worked to inspire private and public investment, and renewed sense of pride in the Blackstone Valley" (personal communication, April 16, 2006). David DePetrillo, Director Rhode Island Division of Tourism and immediate past Chair of the US Council of State Travel Directors stated, "The Blackstone Valley region of Rhode Island is probably one of the best examples in the country of a destination that built its tourism promotion and product development program from practically a zero base. (personal communication, May 1, 2006).

Recognizing the necessity to educate communities about sustainability and sustainable principles the STPD Laboratory initiated a series of Symposiums and Conferences that presented local, national, and international experts to present, instruct, and challenge stakeholders, practitioners, and decision makers. These proceedings developed strategies for participants, mobilizing them to use this knowledge back in their communities. Symposiums and Conferences are held in conjunction with work in community projects by the STPD Laboratory enabling recipients the ability to implement sustainable practices. The STPD Laboratory is not only imparting the knowledge about sustainable principles but also assisting in the implementation of these principles in the Blackstone Valley communities.



Leadership, creativity, collaboration, commitment, and social accountability from all sectors of the community have led the Blackstone Valley to find its direction, follow its vision and share it with others along the way (Billington & Manheim, 2002). This vision is now embodied in the Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. The Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory is offering the knowledge and practices that have proven to be effective and successful in achieving the aims of sustainable development in one small destination of the United States and sharing them with the world.



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